

Interview H0215: with Shakabpa, Wangchug Denden [tib. zhwa sgab pa, dbang phyug bde ldan], (India, 1983) : Part No. 14 of 13

W.D. Shakabpa was a very prominent aristocratic government official who held the rank of Tsipön. He is the author of "Tibet: A Political History." In this interview he discusses the demotion of Kusangtse and the functions of the Tsikhang and Kashag.

Q

During Reting's Regency was this the saddest incident? [Khyungram]

A

I think that is correct. Again there was the incident concerning Kusangtse.

Q

What happened to Kusangtse?

A

When he was the overseer of some laborers, he made some mistakes in judgment. I think he was the manager of the [Tse](#) Labrang. He was demoted from this post too. It was during the [Shodön](#) festival and it was written about in his book. He wrote that when he was demoted during this festival, he had to return back [home] with bare feet and without his [hat](#).

Q

What was the real cause of his humiliation and demotion?

A

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There were some problems concerning the wool trade when he was the Governor of Nagchu Dzong. Then there was another case concerning him while he was the Manager of the [Tse](#) Labrang. Someone asked him to lend a certain amount of gold from his office but he very stubbornly refused. When he was demoted I was present. It was done during the [Shodön](#) festival and he was stripped of his rank and official dress in the middle of the grounds where the Opera was being performed. As already mentioned, while renovating the Phabongka Monastery, something went wrong with the construction. He must have been one of the overseers of the construction. You know, you have to have someone from the [Laja](#). He was summoned to defend himself against these accusations. Later it was said that while he was the Governor of Nagchu, he accepted bribes and generally caused problems for the people. There were a lot of rumors and speculations about his demotion. Most of these are mentioned in his book. I don't have any definite information.

Q

In that year the Regent (Reting) resigned. During his Regency his greatest accomplishment was finding the right reincarnation of the Dalai Lama and successfully enthroning him. His second feat was in renovating the historical Samye monastery. Besides these, what reforms or services has he rendered to improve the welfare of Tibetan citizens?

A

I have nothing to say. He must have done something for the betterment of the people however I cannot pinpoint any specific deed. You can do a lot of things but all the time you can't point them out.

Q

What are his economical and administrative contributions to the Government? His religious contributions are successfully finding the Dalai Lama's reincarnation and renovating Samye monastery.

A

Besides these outstanding contributions, I must admit that I have not keenly observed what his other achievements were. As a rule, in our country, the stress is more on the religious side - like doing rituals, performing sacrifices to the nagas to ensure proper

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rainfall and plenty of water supply and to perform preventive rites in order that no diseases and epidemics break out in the county. Our tradition lays more emphasis on religion as a means of improving the welfare of the people rather than on practical works like building canals, dams, bridges, roads and so on. The Dalai Lama would annually see to it that proper religious rites and sacrifices were performed to ensure soil fertility, plenty of rainfall, good grass growth and so on. Heavy funds were issued and no expenses were spared to perform these age old remedies.

Q

Was this done in secrecy?

A

No, not at all. The government sponsored many of these rites and sacrifices. Taking no risks, each district had to perform their own local religious rites. To ensure that these were properly carried out, individuals were appointed and paid wages to supervise these religious rites.

Q

What were the Kashag and the Tsikhang's daily functions? Were their main functions to see that there was no strife in the country as well as within their ranks?

A

Yes. They had to investigate and settle any disputes so as to maintain law and order. Actually, the functioning of the Kashag was very complex. Among the more important functions was to settle disputes and decide about promotions, demotions and the enlistment of government officials. They stressed these matters. Sometimes they would stop petitions for promotions or demotions and take no immediate actions. This was the more specific work they did. Otherwise, the Kashag's work never ended. Every decision, grant, permission and so forth required the Kashag's attention. It was a heavily centralized set up. The Kashag was like the human throat for all the departments. Just as food or water must pass through the throat to reach the stomach, so must every decision and action pass through the Kashag. Supposing the Kashag ordered the mint [Trapchi] to print a new currency note, then the [Trapchi](#) office must obtain the capital from the Kashag and get their approval. The [Trapchi](#) can't just print the note. They must get an official sanction

with the Kashag's seal affixed to it. That is just an example of how the [Trapchi](#) office went about printing a new currency note. Let's take the case of the [Laja](#) Treasury office. The Government gave a regular grant for its expenditures. There were two positions, the regular official in charge of religious ritual (Shabten Dodampa) and on special occasions the Shalbar Dodampa. They would get the necessary supplies and funds from the [Laja](#) office which had to get these sanctioned by the Kashag. Let us take the case of the Military - although we have only a few thousand soldiers, they must get grain [ration as salary] from the Tsikhang office. However, the Tsikhang could issue these supplies only with the approval of the Kashag in the form of a paper order known as Thönchok Kagya. So as you see, the Kashag was like the throat. There was no way other than going through it.

Q

Then how did the Kashag and the Tsikhang function? Did the Tsikhang come under the Kashag?

A

Yes, the Tsikhang came under the Kashag. The Tsikhang office knew what the income and expenditures were and where they came from. They entered these in their books and stored them away. Both incoming and outgoing supplies were carried out with the Kashag's authority. Supposing they received 1,000 [khe](#) of grain, then they must record it and they must present all the details along the various seals of officials, such as the name of the Dzong, the day and the name of the warehouse and so on. Later, if the military needed grain, they would approach the Kashag and the Kashag would send them to the Tsikhang. The Kashag had no idea which granaries contained how much grain. The Tsikhang would see which warehouse was nearest to the particular regiment's base and tell them the name of the area. Then the military had to go back to the Kashag and obtain a letter stating that such an amount of grain should be given to them. The Tsikhang had to obtain a letter from the Kashag which permitted them to withdraw the necessary amount of grain from the storeroom. Everything went on in a round about manner. Everyone must observe this circular bureaucratic protocol.

Q

When the Kashag and the Tsikhang held a meeting, who proposed the agenda?

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A

I doubt if there was any such agendas prepared beforehand. I was a Tsipa for a long time and served as a Tsipön. There are four Tsipa and they are responsible for most of the work. The work is divided among themselves and they are like assistants to the Tsipön. They must inform their superiors about the day-to-day work. If the nature of the work was simple, even one Tsipön could decide it on the spot. However, if the matter was important or complex, he would wait until the other 3 Tsipön came. Supposing it involved a routine matter like giving grain to the military, then the Tsipa could go straight to the Kashag along with their ledger and the Kashag would at once issue the necessary authorization. The Tsipas had more knowledge about the granaries and the amount of grain in reserve than the Tsipöns.

Q

Did the Tsipön mostly deal in grain?

A

Yes. Mostly we had to deal with grain but we had to also keep a close watch at the same time on the rainfall and the yields of the crops in all different areas of the country. Also what crops were being grown and the annual yield of each Dzong. They would also calculate the amount of butter, cheese and other animal products. The Tsipa would take a payment of grains and then send a note to the person in charge of the granary to put them into storage. The person in charge's name would be recorded along with the amount of grain, the date, the month and so on.

Q

Did the person in charge of the granary buy these grains?

A

In the note it would be mentioned that such and such an amount of grain should be looked after by whoever receives the note.

Q

Did they have to collect the grain from the farmers?

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A

No. The grain had already been collected from the farmers. Each [dzong](#) had already collected the grains and sent it to the Tsikhang. Now there were 2 officials, the Karjukpa [tib. bkar 'jug pa] and Kargyapa [tib. bkar rgya pa]. The Karjukpa was the person who put the grain that was received into the various granaries. The Kargyapa was the person who took out the grain needed for religious expenditures. All these small details were not familiar to the Tsikhang. Only the Tsipa knew about these details. The Tsipa had to submit all these details to the Tsipön.

Q

Were these the main responsibilities of the Tsikhang?

A

Yes, this was one of their basic responsibilities. Any petitions by the Dzongs about infertile soil, poor crops or other similar problems were dealt with by the Tsikhang. The Tsikhang had to make all the necessary plans, sort out the problems and try to come up with a remedy.

Q

Did the Kashag have much more work than this?

A

The Kashag received the core of the problems/issues. The Tsikhang is comparatively like the cook preparing a dish.

Q

Whatever problems or petitions that went to the Kashag, couldn't they go directly to the Regent or the Dalai Lama?

A

They could never go directly to the ruler [the Regent or Dalai Lama] and present their grievances.

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Q

So the Tsipön could never approach the ruler directly?

A

The Tsipön could independently address the Regent and the [Kalön](#) while appointing the 'Yongdü'. The Regent would come to the meeting and read from the official log book saying that such and such an institution, e.g., Drepung, needs a good 'Yongdü' and so on. Then the Tsikhang would offer a white scarf along with a paper on which the name of the Yongdü would be written.????

Q

They would offer this in the midst of the Tsondu?

A

Yes, it was done during the Tsondu. The scarf would be folded and placed on the Regent's table. The nominee was automatically accepted. There would be no discussion or no need for the official seal to be affixed to it. So you see there was this provision in which a Tsipön could nominate a candidate directly to the Regent but in the presence of the Kashag.

Q

Was it also like that in the Kashag?

A

In the Kashag there was nothing like this. A lot of different problems were brought to the Kashag.

Q

In the Kashag, was the list of problems brought by the [Kalön](#) themselves or by their Kadrung?

A

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All the problems and petitions were forwarded through the Kadrung or the Kandrön. Normally no petitions could be submitted directly to the [Kalön](#). According to protocol, they must be forwarded through the Kadrung or the Kandrön. Suppose a [dzong](#) estate wanted to submit a petition. It must be done through the Kadrung or the Kandrön. They would note down the date of the petition's arrival and when the Kashag met and these were put forward. If the matter needed to be forwarded to the ruler, the Kashag would send them up. Most of the details were handled by the Kadrung.

Q

In that same year the Regent submitted his resignation. What was the main reason for this?

A

I don't know. He asked permission resign all of a sudden.

Q

Some say that the Reting Rinpoche did not keep his monk's vows and as he had to initiate and accept the vows of monkhood from the Dalai Lama, he resigned. This was because he himself had failed to uphold his vows. Therefore, he could not initiate or accept someone else's vows of monkhood. Due to this he was nicknamed as "Rabyol-La" [tib. rab yol lags]. Another rumor was that it was predicted that there was some danger to his life if he continued as Regent. Is this right?

A

This rumor was widely accepted by outsiders. According to this rumor, the Senge Re Lama and another had done 'Tra' divination and predicted that there was some danger to his life and to dispel this he had personally to perform certain religious rites and meditations. At that time, the Tsondu requested that he not step down from his post twice, but Reting replied that it was most imperative that he should be relieved from his post. He suggested that the senior tutor [to the Dalai Lama], [Taktra](#), take over his post. Anyway, everything was decided within a day or two.

Q

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Was that the same year that the Chinese official banged at the [Norbulinga](#) palace door at night?

A

That was after [Taktra](#) had ascended the throne.

Q

So these were the events during Reting's regency. What were the positive events of his regency?

A

I have no idea, either positive or negative.

Q

During Reting's regency who were the new Shapes appointed by him? When he ascended the throne were Lhalu, Lukhang, [Trimön](#), Tenkyong of Jamyang Khyil and Mendö the Shapes?

A

When Tenkyong passed away, Trekhang [Sawangchemmo](#) was appointed as [Shape](#). Then I don't remember in whose place Bonshö was appointed as a [Shape](#). When Bonshö was a [Shape](#), [Trimön](#) was still in the office. Then Tempa Jayan was appointed as a [Shape](#) while he was the Commander-in-Chief of the military and Phünkhang was the other [Shape](#) during Reting's regency.

Q

Was Surkhang also appointed as a [Shape](#)?

A

No. Surkhang was appointed by [Taktra](#).

Q

Yes, that's true. Surkhang and Reting did not get along well since during Reting's reign Surkhang was deprived of his estate known as Treshong. The reason behind Reting's

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resignation was said to be his illness but don't you think it was mainly because he had lost his monk's vows?

A

I wonder?

Q

At that time, what did most people suspect? What were the ordinary citizen's beliefs?

A

There was some Lama from Phenpo whose divination predicted some unforeseen danger to his life. Before that he was perfectly in good health. He was at the peak of his career when all of the sudden he resigned from his post. I don't know what the real reason was? Then [Taktra](#) ascended the throne.